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ABSTRACT

The ability of children at different ages to distinguish instructions to "ask" from instructions to "tell" and the types of structures used to express these directives were studied. Subjects were 120 children, aged 2 years 6 months to 6 years 6 months. Children were instructed to either ask or tell an adult or another child to give them puzzle pieces. The dependent measures were the politeness of the directives used by the children, as determined from adult ratings, and the syntactic form (imperative, interrogative, or declarative) of the directives. Results suggest that children become more polite, in adult eyes, as they grow older, and they are more polite when instructed to ask than when instructed to tell. Children can productively distinguish instructions to ask from instructions to tell, but older children do so more reliably. This finding suggests that they recognize and are able to convey the differences in illocutionary force authorized by the two words. Children used imperatives more frequently to tell than to ask, and interrogatives more frequently to ask than to tell. Declaratives were employed frequently by the younger children, but rarely by the older children. While older children were more polite to adults than to children, the 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds were more polite to other children. (SW)

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HOW CHILDREN ASK AND TELL: A SPEECH ACT ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN'S REQUESTS

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Current research on the pragmatics of children's language has focused less on children's failures to adjust to situational needs and more on the kinds of "fine-tuning" that they can and do employ in their use of language (cf. Bates, 1976a; Sachs & Devin, 1976; Shatz & Gelman, 1973). A major area of interest is the development of the ability to express different communicative intentions in language through the use of different speech acts (e.g., Dore, 1977). One illocutionary act that has received particular attention in child language is the directive, or request for action (Garvey, 1975). The present paper is concerned with the ability of children at different ages to distinguish instructions to ask from instructions to tell in their directives to other children and adults, and the types of structures used to express the directives.

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Chomsky (1969) found that children have difficulty distinguishing the request-for-information (question) sense of ask from the report-of-information sense of tell. However, she did not investigate two other senses of ask and tell: the directive senses. These senses appear to function equivalently in sentences like Ask him to leave and Tell him to leave, differing only in the illocutionary force authorized for the directive to be issued. Ask authorizes the request mode, which is appropriate, for example, in situations in which the speaker does not have authority over the addressee, while tell authorizes the command mode, which is more appropriate for situations in which the speaker does have authority over the addressee. Thus, the intended perlocutionary effect (that the addressee perform the desired action) of ask and tell is the same for these senses, but the illocutionary forces reported or authorized differ.

One dimension sensitive to the difference between commands and requests is politeness: a request will be perceived as more polite than a command. Thus, directives issued after instructions to ask should be more polite than directives issued after instructions to tell, if the child understands the difference between their directive senses. A second potential difference lies in the syntactic form chosen for the directive. The appropriate form for a request is the interrogative, while the appropriate form for a command is the imperative. Children who understand the difference between asking and telling should therefore use interrogatives to ask, and imperatives to tell.

Interrogative directives (requests) differ from imperative directives (commands) in an interesting way. Interrogative directives, in addition to their conveyed request-for-action sense, have a literal request-for-information sense. For example, Are you reading the paper?

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can serve as a request for information, as well as a request for the paper. Considerable attention has been devoted to the relationship between these two senses (Sadock, 1974; Searle, 1975), the way in which they are manipulated by adults trying to produce and understand requests (Clark & Lucy, 1975; Schweller, Note 1), and the development of children's ability to deal with indirect requests (Dore, in press; Shatz, 1975).

An influential approach to the development of indirect requests in children derives from the work of Clark and Lucy (1975). Clark and Lucy provide evidence from adult comprehension that in order to understand an indirect request, it is first necessary to derive the literal force of the request, match it to the context, and, if it is found to be inappropriate in that context, derive the intended force. This formulation suggests that indirect speech acts, and hence interrogative directives, are considerably more complex than direct speech acts.

Shatz (1975), extrapolating this analysis to children's comprehension, has suggested that children may try to match communicative intentions to syntactic forms in order to understand language. Thus, the imperative form of an utterance would signal a command, a declarative an assertion, and an interrogative a question. Although Shatz (1974, 1975) found evidence against this formulation in children's comprehension of directives, the hypothesis might be valid for production: children may learn syntactic forms that are canonical for the intentions they wish to express earlier than forms which indirectly express the intention, but are non-canonical. Applied to directives, this suggests that children should produce imperative directives before interrogative directives, since the conveyed force of an interrogative directive (requesting action) differs from its literal force (request for information). This hypothesis (hereafter the Canonical Forms Hypothesis) has been proposed for both comprehension and production by Ervin-Tripp (1974, 1975, cited by Bates, 1976b).

Bates (1976a) reports experimental and longitudinal evidence from Italian children which tends to disconform this hypothesis. Bates found that the two children she studied longitudinally used interrogatives as requests for action before using them as requests for information, so that they were used indirectly before they were used directly. In addition, the children used both imperative and interrogative forms to issue directives very early, though the imperatives appeared somewhat earlier and were more frequent.

A difficulty with generalizing from the Italian data to English, however, is that in Italian, simple indicative questions like Are you baking cookies? can function as indirect requests, as Bates reports, whereas typical English indirect requests require use of modal verbs (e.g., Would you bake cookies?). These verbs are a late acquisition. On the other hand, the English imperative system is less complex than the Italian, so that children learning English may have less difficulty with imperative directives than children learning Italian. These facts suggest

different interactions between syntactic complexity and pragmatic complexity, so that the Canonical Forms Hypothesis may more accurately predict order of acquisition in English than in Italian. If so, the types of forms used by younger children to ask may not differ from the forms they use to tell, with both tending to be imperatives, since imperatives have literal directive force. Older children should be more likely to employ interrogative directives.

The experiment reported below investigated the productive differentiation of ask and tell instructions by 2½- to 6½-year-old children. Children instructed to ask should produce more polite directives than children instructed to tell. The grammatical form of ask-elicited directives should differ from tell-elicited directives, with interrogatives dominating in the former condition, and imperatives in the latter. However, the Canonical Forms Hypothesis suggests that younger children may employ imperatives for all directives, with the indirect interrogatives developing later. This would result in an interaction between instructions to ask or tell and age. The children in the study addressed both another child and an adult; directives to adults should be more polite than directives to children, since children are less likely to use imperatives to address adults than other children (Sachs & Devin, 1976). However this trend may be more pronounced with instructions to tell than to ask, as James (Note 2) found differences in the politeness of directives to role-played child and adult addressees in command situations, but no differences in request situations.

Method

Participants

The subjects were 120 children enrolled in church-related nursery schools in Eugene, Oregon. There were four age groups, with 24 children in the youngest group (the 3-year-old group) and 32 in each of the three older groups (the 4-, 5-, and 6-year-old groups). The mean age of the 3-year-old group was 35.9 months (range 30 to 41 months), of the 4-year-old group, 47.5 months (range 42 to 53 months), of the 5-year-old group, 58.8 months (range 54 to 65 months), and of the 6-year-old group, 72.4 months (range 66 to 77 months). There were equal numbers of males and females in each age group.

The task also required the participation of an adult and a child addressee, in addition to the experimenter and the child subject. The child addressees were same-age classmates of the subjects; the adult addressee was a woman with whom the children were relatively unfamiliar.

Materials

Materials for the study consisted of two inlaid woodboard puzzles, one of a table setting with five pieces, and one of animals with eleven pieces. The puzzles were selected so that each piece could be readily labelled by children in the age range investigated.

Procedure

The experimenter recruited two children from the nursery school playroom and escorted them to an adjoining room, where they were introduced to the adult addressee. One of the children was asked to be the "helper" (child addressee) while the other child played the game; the child addressee's only task was to give puzzle pieces to the subject when they were indicated. When the children seemed comfortable, the experimenter showed the puzzles to the subject, took apart the table setting puzzle, and distributed the pieces to the two addressees. She gave the following instructions to the subject: "I'm going to give half of the puzzle pieces to [name of adult addressee] and half to [name of child addressee]. To put the puzzle together, you'll have to get the puzzle pieces back. All you have to do to get them back is (ask/tell) [adult addressee] or [child addressee] to give you a puzzle piece." Half of the children in each group received instructions to ask, and half received instructions to tell. Use of the word ask or tell in the instructions was the only difference between the ask and tell conditions.

When the subject completed the first puzzle, the experimenter repeated the above procedure with the animal puzzle, dividing pieces between the addressees in such a way that at the end of the session the subject would have directed an equal number of directives to the child and the adult addressee. After completing the animal puzzle, the subject was asked to be the helper for the next session. The child addressee was then returned to the playroom and another subject recruited. No child served as a subject after having been an addressee. Within age and instruction groups, half of the child addressees were same-sex and half were opposite-sex.

The child's directives were recorded by the adult addressee, along with any experimenter prompts or other relevant information. Each child produced 16 directives, one for each puzzle piece.

Design

Subjects were assigned to the cells of a 4 X 2 X 2 factorial design. The factors were age, ask vs. tell instructions, and adult vs. child addressee. Adult vs. child addressee was a within-subjects factor; age and instructions were between-subjects factors. Within age groups, equal numbers of subjects were assigned to each cell of the design, although cell size in the youngest group was smaller than in the older three groups.

Scoring

The dependent measures were the politeness of the directives used by the children, as determined from adult ratings, and the syntactic form (imperative, interrogative, or declarative) of the directives.

Politeness ratings. All of the directives produced by the children

were standardized in terms of a directive situation which adults would find plausible: passing the salt at the dinner table. For example, the directive I need the lion was transformed into I need the salt. Ungrammatical directives were normalized, and garbled and inaudible portions of the directives were filled in with the most probable content. All directives containing the word please were included once with please and once without.

These procedures resulted in 60 unique directives. These were randomized and assembled in booklets in four different orders, with approximately equal numbers of subjects receiving each order. Subjects rated each directive on a five-point scale. The raters were given the following instructions:

> Imagine that you and a friend are at dinner. Your companion needs the salt, which is near you and out of his/her reach. He or she requests the salt in one of the ways listed on the following pages. We would like you to indicate on the 5-point scale beside each request how polite you think the request is, where 5 is very polite, and 1 verges on rudeness. The numbers 2 to 4 can be used to indicate intermediate degrees of politeness. Circle the number corresponding to your judgment of the request's degree of politeness.

The raters were 30 undergraduates at the University of Oregon, who received extra credit in a lower-level psychology course for their service.

The mean politeness rating for each directive in its "salt" form was determined, and this score was assigned to the corresponding directives produced by each child. Each directive containing please received a with-please and a without-please score. Four mean scores were calculated for each child on the basis of these ratings, two representing the politeness of the eight directives addressed to adults, and two for the directives addressed to children. One of the two scores in each case was the mean of the ratings for the eight original directives, disregarding whether or not they contained please; the second score was the mean of the ratings for the same eight directives with please, when it occurred, removed.

Form of directive. The number of directives used by each child that were declaratives (with subject-verb-object order, e.g., I want the plate), interrogatives (with inversion of the subject and modal verb, e.g., Can I have the plate?), and imperatives (with deleted subject, e.g., Give me the plate) was determined separately for directives addressed to adults and directives addressed to children. All directives were assigned to one of these three classes, with the exception of rare cases in which a child simply grabbed a puzzle piece without producing a directive. Questionable cases were discussed by the authors and assigned to the most nearly appropriate category.

Results

The mean politeness scores are shown in Table 1 for both with-*please* and without-*please* ratings. Analysis of variance on the with-*please* scores using a least-squares solution to correct for unequal cell sizes (as did all of the analyses reported) showed effects of age and task to be significant; for age, $F(3,112) = 2.94$, $p < .05$, reflecting a trend toward increased politeness with increasing age; and for task, $F(1,112) = 7.29$, $p < .01$, resulting from greater politeness in the *ask* condition than in the *tell* condition. The age X task interaction was not significant, $F(3,112) = .67$, $MS_e = 2.28$. The effect of addressee and the task X addressee interaction were also non-significant, $F(1,112) = .75$ and .21, $MS_e = .04$. There was a significant interaction between age and addressee ($F(3,112) = 3.75$, $p < .05$), reflecting the fact that the two younger groups were more polite to other children, while the two older groups were more polite to the adult.

Planned comparisons between *ask* and *tell* conditions at each age level showed that the difference between *ask* and *tell* was reliable only for the 6-year-olds ($p < .05$).

Table 1

Mean Politeness Ratings of Directives Produced

a. With *please*

	Age				
Instructions	3	4	5	6	
ASK	1.70	1.84	2.23	2.55	2.10
TELL	.96	1.74	1.69	1.77	1.58
	1.33	1.79	1.96	2.16	

b. Without *please*

ASK	1.54	1.58	1.56	2.17	1.73
TELL	.94	1.45	1.39	1.69	1.40
	1.24	1.52	1.48	1.93	

Because the effect of adding *please* to a directive was substantial (increasing its rated politeness by a mean of 1.46 scale units), a second analysis was performed on the ratings of the same directives without *please*, in order to determine if politeness effects were evident in the radical of the directive alone. The results of this analysis replicated the results of the analysis with *please*, although the alpha level accepted for significance must be relaxed to include the effect of instructions: for age, $F(3,112) = 2.74$, $p < .05$; for task, $F(1,112) = 3.63$, $p < .10$; and for the age X addressee interaction, $F(3,112) = 4.80$, $p < .01$. The age X task interaction, the main

effect of addressee, and the task X addressee interaction were not significant; $F(3,112) = .43$, $MS_e = 1.77$; $F(1,112) = .29$ and .10, $MS_e = .03$.

The number of children who used please at least once in their set of directives did not differ between instruction conditions, $\chi^2(1) = 1.32$, $p > .2$, with 22 subjects using please in the ask condition and 15 in the tell condition. However, the number of children who used please in their first directive did differ, $\chi^2(1) = 4.00$, $p < .05$, with 12 in the ask condition and 4 in the tell condition.

Table 2

Mean Number of Directives Produced in Three Sentence Types

		Age				
		3	4	5	6	
Imperative	ASK	2.67	1.75	2.66	1.56	2.12
	TELL	3.58	2.34	4.44	3.12	3.36
		3.12	2.05	3.55	2.34	
Interrogative	ASK	2.88	4.06	4.06	6.06	4.36
	TELL	.67	2.81	3.38	4.47	2.98
		1.77	3.44	3.72	5.27	
Declarative	ASK	2.46	2.19	1.22	.38	1.50
	TELL	3.75	2.84	.16	.41	1.66
		3.10	2.52	.69	.39	

Table 2 presents the mean numbers of imperatives, interrogatives, and declaratives used in each age group in the two instruction conditions. Analysis of variance of each type of directive individually showed, for imperatives, an overall effect of task, $F(1,112) = 4.33$, $p < .05$, reflecting greater use of imperatives in the tell condition. The main effect of age, the age X task interaction, the main effect of addressee, and the task X addressee interaction were not significant, $F(3,112) = 1.42$ and .23, $MS_e = 21.60$, and $F(1,112) = .02$ and .79, $MS_e = .76$.

The analysis of interrogatives showed overall effects of age ($F(3,112) = 4.52$, $p < .01$) reflecting increased use of interrogatives by older children, and of task ($F(1,112) = 4.59$, $p < .01$) indicating greater interrogative use in the ask condition than in the tell condition. There was again a significant age X addressee interaction, $F(3,112) = 2.98$, $p < .05$, due to the two younger groups using more questions when

addressing children than adults, and the opposite for the two older groups. The main effect of addressee and the task X addressee interaction were not significant, $F(1,112) = .04$ and .69, $MS_e = .38$; the age X task interaction was also not significant, $F(3,112) = .23$, $MS_e = 25.02$.

The declarative analysis revealed on overall effect of age, $F(3,112) = 8.15$, $p < .01$, resulting from sharply decreased use of declarative directives by older children. No other effects were significant: task and age X task, $F(1,112) = .12$ and $F(3,112) = 1.15$, $MS_e = 12.63$; and addressee and task X addressee, $F(1,112) = .01$ and .09, $MS_e = .43$.

To summarize the major results for individual sentence types, children used imperatives significantly more often to tell than to ask; they used interrogatives significantly more often to ask than to tell; older children used significantly more questions than younger children, with older children more likely to use questions when addressing adults, and younger children more likely to use them when addressing older children; and younger children used significantly more declaratives than older children.

Discussion

The results from the analysis of rated politeness of the directives indicate that children do become more polite, in adult eyes, as they grow older. More interestingly, they are politer when instructed to ask than when instructed to tell. This was true of children at all age levels, although the difference was reliable only for the 6-year-old group. Thus, children can productively distinguish instructions to ask from instructions to tell, but older children do so more reliably. This suggests that they recognize and are able to convey the differences in illocutionary force authorized by the two words.

One way in which this differentiation might be accomplished is simply by addition of the word please to directives in the ask condition, and omitting it in the tell condition. Although the number of children who used please at least once did not differ significantly between instruction conditions, more children did use please when asking than when telling. In addition, the number of children who used please in their first directive (when, presumably, the effect of the instruction to ask or tell should be strongest) was significantly larger for ask.

Although please is a readily available way to upgrade a directive, choice of sentence type is a somewhat more sophisticated strategy. However, because addition of please to a directive strongly affected adult ratings, and please-use was more frequent in the ask condition, use of please could be entirely responsible for the greater perceived politeness when asking. In order to determine whether please use alone accounted for the difference between asking and telling, the ratings of the requests with please removed were analyzed. While the difference between instruction conditions diminishes to a marginal level of significance, the fact that a difference remains suggests that even without using please,

children have the means to differentiate illocutionary acts in the radical of the directive.

The breakdown of the directives into the different types used by the children supports this suggestion. Children used imperatives, the canonical form for commands, more frequently to tell than to ask, and interrogatives, the canonical form for requests, more frequently to ask than to tell. Declaratives, which are canonical for assertions, not directives, were employed frequently by the younger children, but rarely by the older children. Increased use of interrogatives with age may reflect at least two underlying processes: greater ability to manipulate the complex syntax of questions, and an increasing compliance with demands for polite behavior in situations meeting the felicity conditions for directive use. The former process may serve the needs of the latter.

The predicted addressee effects were not obtained. While older children were more polite to adults than to children, the 3- and 4-year-olds were more polite to other children. An immediate source of this effect is the same interaction for interrogatives: 3- and 4-year-olds directed more questions to other children, while 5- and 6-year-olds directed more questions to adults. Questions were the forms rated highest in politeness. This does not explain the effect, however, and the underlying cause of the interaction is not obvious.

The absence of an interaction between instructions and age, and the composition of the children's directive sets, suggest that children do not employ forms that literally convey their intentions earlier than forms which convey them indirectly. While the absence of the interaction may result from curtailment of the lower end of the age range, the kinds of directives used by the children in the younger groups are strong evidence against the hypothesis. Children in the two younger groups, in agreement with the longitudinal and experimental findings of Bates (1976a), routinely employed interrogative forms as directives, as well as declaratives (particularly of the I want and I need type, but also such elaborately indirect forms as I don't have the cat and I think I'll have the plate, from subjects aged 47 to 49 months). Neither interrogatives nor declaratives literally convey directives, and such forms constitued 61% of the corpus of the youngest group. Moreover, there was no significant decline in the use of direct, imperative forms: the older two groups together in fact used more imperatives than the two combined younger groups.

This is not to claim that children understand the dual functions of their indirect speech acts. The child's use of non-literal forms to convey requests may be idiomatic (in the sense of Sadock, 1974), so that they function, for the child, independently of their literal meaning. In some cases, the literal meaning may grow out of idiomatic uses. But if children's indirect requests are regarded as idiomatic, it must be recognized as a very productive kind of idiomaticity--the forms are not just memorized. That children do create novel questions and declaratives to function as directives is suggested in this range of examples from one of our subjects (51 months): Give me a puzzle piece, I want the salt please and the pepper

please, Can I have the cat?, Will you give me the doggie please?, I want the duckie, and Could I please have the teddy bear? An adequate approach to the problem of indirect requests in children's language must account for this productivity without requiring complex computations that are clearly beyond the child's cognitive resources.

In summary, the present study shows that children in the age range of 3 to 6 years have productive understanding of the difference between the directive senses of ask and tell. This productive understanding was revealed in directives that were adjusted, in accordance with instructions to ask or tell, to reflect different illocutionary intentions while achieving the same perlocutionary effect. Thus, children were more polite when asking than when telling, as determined from adult ratings of their directives, and different sentence types predominated in the two instruction conditions--interrogatives for asking, and imperatives for telling. The data do not support the claim that children's early requests for action from another person tend to be direct and become less literal with age.

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